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Kootenai River still can be wild

June 20, 2006

Editorial by Dawn Ballou, Editor, LibbyMT.com

Before the Libby Dam was put in, the Kootenai River regularly flooded with spring high waters and caused considerable damage and destruction on its path to the Columbia River. The river gathers water from a huge watershed in both the United States and Canada.

One of the primary reasons for the dam was flood control. Residents living along the river have had some 40 years of constant and stable river flows to be lulled into a sense of security, and many homes and even communities have been allowed to sprout up right to the river's edge.

Dam and water managers have done a tremendous job of water forecasting and managing water levels to handle the water flow rates and flood control part of the Kootenai River flows since the dam was put in. Communities downstream haven't seen spring flooding in many years to wash them out and remind them that the river has a natural cycle and flood plain and to be cautious about allowing building in those areas.

Mother Nature has a way of coming back and reminding us that even with our incredible engineering capabilities, nature is something that can be very hard to control when it decides to go its own way.

As of Sunday morning, inflow into Lake Koocanusa was 62,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) while discharge was 56,000 cfs, with the reservoir at close to full-pool. The high flows have caused the river to reach flood stage at Bonners Ferry, Idaho, and some Libby residents near the river have started to sandbag.

All in all, it is a reminder of the original reason why the dam was put there in the first place: flood control. The high water isn't causing significant damage to structures along the river above or in Libby, but has crested more than two feet above flood stage in Bonners Ferry, Idaho. Idaho Governor Jim Risch declared a state of emergency on Friday, June 16, because of high water levels on the Kootenai River. As of this article, the city park was flooded and high water threatened the Kootenai River Inn, which was being sandbagged. No injuries or damage to structures has yet been reported there, although there has been a breach of water-sogged levies.

Here are photos of the recent high flows and some historical reminders of years past in the days



1948 flooding

Flooding in 1948 inundated Libby. This photo is looking east showing the Libby train depot, tracks and parking area under water. Mineral Avenue is to the right, the Kootenai River just to the left. Picture part of an exhibit at the Libby Dam Visitor Center-Photo courtesy Heritage Museum.



How the dam helps

This display at the Libby Dam Visitor Center shows how the Libby Dam controls the damage of the spring runoff of the Kootenai River. Photo by Dawn Ballou.

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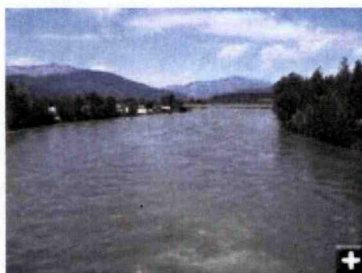

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This display at the Libby Dam Visitor Center shows how the Libby Dam controls the damage of the spring runoff of the Kootenai River. Photo by Dawn Ballou.

before Libby Dam was there.



River near Libby

View of the Kootenai River high flows, looking west (downstream) from the old haul bridge on Monday, June 19, 2006. Downtown Libby is just to the left. Photo by Maggie Craig.



Full Pool

The lake water level was .03 feet below full pool on Monday, June 19, 2006. Inflow was 900 cfs higher than discharge. Photo by Maggie Craig.



Where are the falls?

Kootenai Falls are all but submerged under the current high flows. Photo taken on Saturday, June 17. Photo by Maggie Craig.



Low Flow View-2003

Same view of the falls as the previous photo, this one was taken in September, 2003. Photo by Maggie Craig.



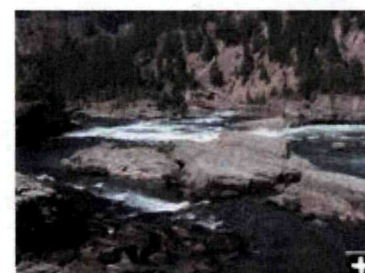
High flows-June 2006

Flows on this date (Saturday, June 17) are now discharged from Libby Dam at 55,000 cubic feet per second. This is a photo at Kootenai Falls of the side channel to the left of the main falls. Photo by Maggie Craig.



Watching the river wild

The river is an incredible sight with the extremely high flows. This view is at Kootenai Falls, taken on Saturday, June 17. Photo by Maggie Craig.

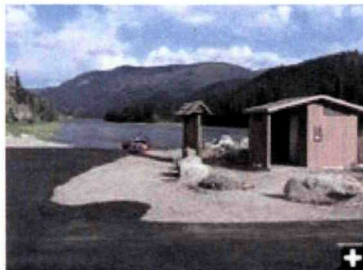


Kootenai River high flows

This cottonwood tree is submerged in the high water just below Kootenai Falls. Photo taken on Saturday, June 17. Photo by Maggie Craig.

**Osprey Landing 2006**

Osprey Landing boat launch site on Monday, June 19. Photo by Maggie Craig.

**Osprey Boat Launch 2005**

Osprey Landing Boat Launch a year earlier in August, 2005, as a comparison picture. Photo by Dawn Ballou.

Falls under water-June 2006

Another view of the Kootenai Falls area with the high flows of the Kootenai River on Saturday, June 17. Photo by Maggie Craig.

**Osprey Landing 2005**

Osprey Landing view of the Kootenai River with normal flows in August, 2005. Photo by Dawn Ballou.

**Osprey Landing Boat Launch**

Osprey Landing Boat Launch site on the Kootenai River at the location of the old rereg dam site, halfway between Libby and Libby Dam. Archive photo from 2005 by Dawn Ballou.

Downstream view-2003

View of Kootenai River in September, 2003 showing roughly the same place as previous photo. Photo by Maggie Craig.

**Osprey Landing high flows**

Osprey Landing high flows on Monday, June 19, 2006. Photo by Maggie Craig.

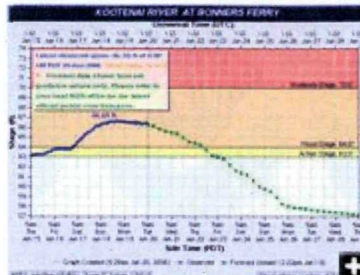
**Libby Dam-June 2006**

Libby Dam on Monday, June 19, 2006. The flow discharge through the dam spillways is between 55,000-56,000 cubic feet per second (cfs). Rainstorms in Canada were causing inflow to Lake Koocanusa Reservoir to reach a high of 64,000 cfs. The lake water level behind the dam is nearly at full pool on this date (Monday). Photo by Maggie Craig.



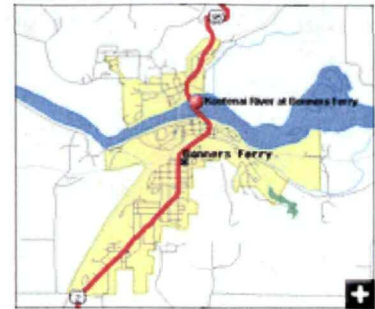
Flooded Riverbank

Near the confluence of the Fisher and Kootenai Rivers, a couple miles downstream from Libby Dam, on Monday, June 19, 2006. Photo by Maggie Craig.



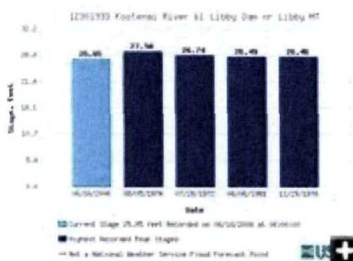
River Flow Level Graph

Kootenai River water flow levels are above flood stage at Bonners Ferry, Idaho. Graph by the National Weather Service Advanced Hydrologic Prediction Service. Idaho Governor Jim Risch declared a state of emergency on Friday, June 16, because of high water levels on the Kootenai River.



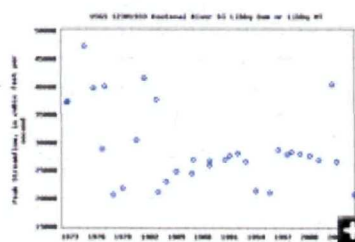
River at Bonners Ferry Idaho

High flow releases from the Libby Dam have caused the Kootenai River to crest at 66.63 feet on Sunday, June 18, in Bonners Ferry, Idaho. Flood stage at this location is 64 feet. Because Libby Dam managers must leave the discharge high to release the high flow volumes coming into Lake Kootanusa, they will continue to have these high flows at least through Thursday, June 22. The high water has flooded the city park and threatens the Kootenai River Inn, which is being sandbagged. There were no reported injuries or structural damage as a result of the high water as of Sunday, June 18 in Bonners Ferry. National Weather Service map.



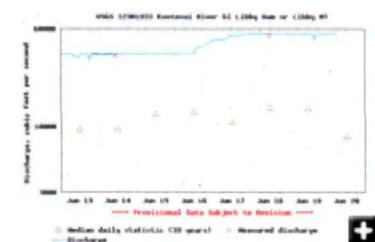
Flood Tracking

Graph showing historical flood stages at Libby Dam. USGS chart.



Historical Peaks

Historical peak flows at Libby Dam. USGS graphic.



June 2006 Discharge

Kootenai River discharges below Libby Dam for June 13-20, 2006. USGS graphic.



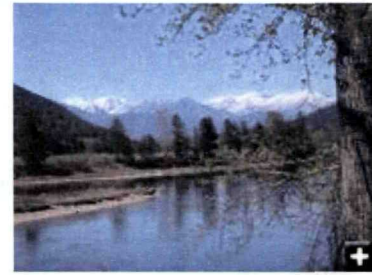
River Gauge Height

Kootenai River gauge height measurements below Libby Dam for June 13-20, 2006. USGS graphic.



River on June 9, 2006

The Kootenai River on Friday, June 9, 2006. Photo by Maggie Craig.



River on April 29, 2006

Kootenai River on April 29, 2006. Photo by Maggie Craig.

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